Opinion: St. Lawrence River's rights should be recognized

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Body

On May 5, two related private member's bills proposing the recognition of the St. Lawrence River's rights were presented in the House of Commons and the National Assembly. These bills represent a breakthrough for the rights of nature movement in North America.

If passed, the bills would create a system of guardians responsible for protecting the St. Lawrence's rights, including through legal procedures when necessary. Establishing the St. Lawrence as a legal person - the same way that a human being or a corporation is - would make it easier to protect it from exploitation by ensuring that its preservation is considered for its own sake, and not merely when environmental damage coincides with proven harm to human communities. Granting the St. Lawrence rights, such as the right to protection from contamination and to the preservation of its natural biodiversity, would help preserve it from further environmental degradation.

These bills were a labour of love for the Observatoire international des droits de la Nature and its partners of the St. Lawrence River Alliance, a coalition of research centres, environmental organizations and municipalities, along with the Mamuitun Tribal Council, that have mobilized in order to obtain better legal safeguards for the St. Lawrence River. The alliance represents the coming together of municipal engagement, scientific research and Indigenous traditional knowledge.

This ethos gives its full weight to the words pronounced by Uapukun Mestokosho, Innu leader and member of the Observatoire, who spoke May 5 of the necessity to decolonize our relationship to water: "More than a living being, the River is life. We depend upon him." She echoed the Observatoire's president, Yenny Vega Cardenas, who pointed out the importance for humans to assume their responsibilities vis-Ã -vis the river that sustains them. In fact, both bills seek to recognize the St. Lawrence as an actor of its own, deserving respect and protection for its central role in Quebec's environmental, economic and cultural landscape.

On the federal front, the bill was presented to the Commons by NDP MP Alexandre Boulerice. In late April, on Earth Day, he accompanied Vega Cardenas to the United Nations to present this project. This was an opportunity to introduce to the international community the St. Lawrence River Bill of Rights, and situate it within the growing rights of nature movement.

At the National Assembly, the bill was introduced by Ã‰milise Lessard-Therrien, QuÃ©bec solidaire's spokesperson for the environment. Upon presenting the bill, she, too, paid homage to the beauty of the St. Lawrence River. Previously, a moving chant by the Innu leader and poet Rita Mestokosho marked a momentous occasion for Indigenous drums to resonate within the halls of the National Assembly.

The introduction of the bills in both legislatures was a powerful moment, but it is only the first of many steps toward a greener future. In the coming months, the Observatoire will be working toward expanding the St. Lawrence River

Alliance and starting a national conversation on the rights of nature. There is also plenty of room for individuals to join the movement. The greater the support, the greater the political pressure that will compel our leaders to adopt the Bill of Rights. By doing so, not only would we protect a jewel of Quebec's landscape, but we would also take an important step toward changing our relationship with nature from one of domination to one of reciprocity. As UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Environment David Boyd stated: "The Saint Lawrence River is the beating heart of Quebec but has been ravaged by centuries of exploitation. Legislation recognizing the rights of the Saint Lawrence River would mark a revolutionary turning point in Canadian history, recognizing that our future depends on living in harmony with nature."

Elara Neath Thomin is an intern at the Observatoire international des droits de la Nature and an undergraduate student at McGill University. She lives in St-Lambert.

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